

Chapter II

Life in the Valley 1800 - 1840

Much of what can be found of the description of life on the Ohio frontier came from the journals of the traveling clergy...of all faiths. There were straightforward reasons for this. First, the clergy were literate, in a time and place in which literacy was not all that common. Secondly, the frontier farmers and tradesmen had scant time to do more than struggle to gain a toe-hold in the wilderness. Their work-days stretched from light to dark in an industry which, even in today's world of high-tech agriculture, demands long hours and hard physical effort. Third, clergymen were usually required to submit reports of their travels to their superiors.

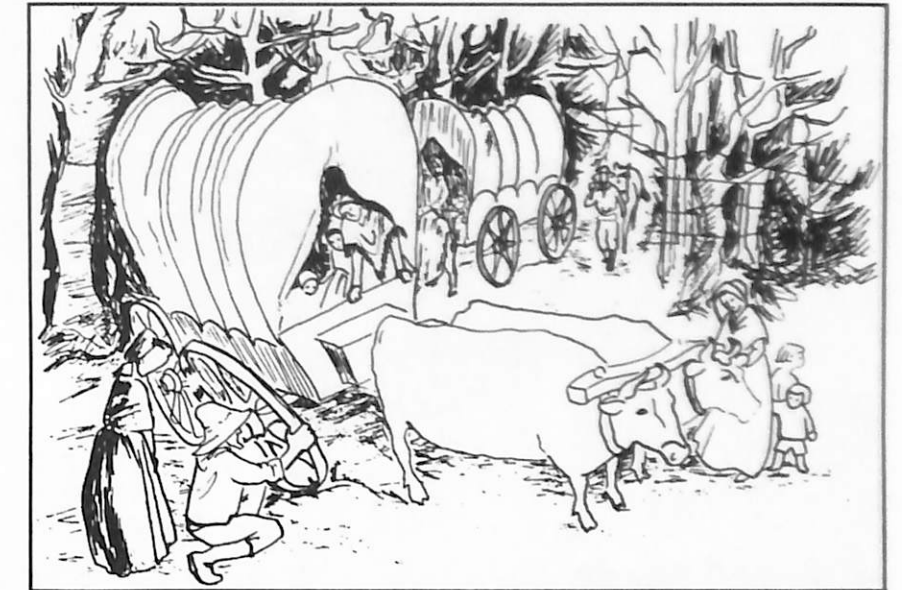
It is from the writings of one of these, Father Joseph Machebeuf, a traveling missionary in early Ohio, that the following picture of what life was like in Stonelick Valley during those years can be pieced together.

Land in the Northwest Territories was usually owned by the Government or by absentee owners who had been given land grants in lieu of pay for their military service in the Revolutionary War. Sometimes settlers just "settled" and, in due course, exercised "squatter's rights," claiming the land. More often, land was purchased at very low prices from New Englanders who had no interest in "going West." Or, it was purchased from the appropriate governmental body. In any case, it was rather readily available.

The first task of the settler was simply to reach the land. This usually entailed overland travel without the benefit of roads. Game trails offered some advantage; at least the brush had been pushed aside. But the difficulty of bringing tools, farming equipment and family possessions to the site usually meant that a wagon was required. Most trails were not wide enough to accommodate wagons. Trees had to be felled and cleared, large stones removed, and creek fords constructed. All of this without the benefit of mechanized equipment.

Since one man could not, normally, do this work unaided, families tended to travel together and to settle in groups. So it was in Stonelick Valley. Settlements appearing on older maps, such as "Stonelick" and "Cravertown" are not now, and were never, "towns" in the formal sense. They were places where several families settled, for some particular reason, or for no reason at all, as the following story illustrates.

According to Father Machebeuf's journal, four Catholic families - 25 persons in all - were packed into two wagons drawn by oxen and were trying to make their way through the woods near Norwalk, in 1828, when one of the wheels, mired in heavy mud, broke. The Bauer, Phillips, Carabin and Baumgartner families, without repair parts or hope of getting any, decided to settle on the spot. They called the settlement Vredenbourg, later renamed Peru, and with others, formed St.



An artist's rendering of the event leading to the formation of St. Alphonsus parish.
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Alphonsus parish. An interesting footnote: Sister Francisca, an exiled French nun, (the reason for exile not stated), was among the members of the Bauer family. Upon reaching the site of settlement, the next tasks were to construct some minimum shelter and to remove obstacles to cultivation - trees and rocks. Often, the better part of a year might pass before land could be tilled to plant the first crop, so that a harvest might be 18 to 24 months in the future. Provisions had to be brought in to provide food for that period. If spoiled or destroyed by foraging animals, very serious hardship resulted. Here, again, was the advantage of the multi-family settlement.

Food supplies were augmented by hunting and by using native foods, such as nuts, berries, and edible wild plants. The fictionalized picture of a frontier abundant with large game, such as deer, is simply not accurate. (It is estimated that there are more deer in Ohio today than when the region became a state in 1803.) Rabbits, squirrels, and raccoons were far more common on frontier tables than was venison. Powder, shot and flint were scarce and expensive. It became quickly apparent that agriculture and survival were synonymous.

Cool weather, fast-growing crops such as turnips and cabbage, also having the advantage of winter storage, were used to bridge the gap. They could be planted even before stumps were removed. The rich, moist soil of the Stonelick Valley bottoms supported these well, and helped families through the critical first months of settlement.

The work was back-breaking. The mature forests contained sycamore, maple, elm, hickory and beech, often very large specimens. None were easily felled nor easily removed. The forest was a blessing, however, in other ways. Byproducts of the weary effort were logs to build housing and, of course, firewood.

The creek was also a blessing. It provided water for both man and beast, and its limestone bed supplied a valuable building material for foundations, fireplaces and chimneys. Fish, crayfish, turtles and frogs were occasional diet supplements. Like a miniature Nile, its floods kept the bottoms fertile. Native creek stone, in fact, forms the foundation of the present church of St. Philomena, as it had for its preceding structures.

Winters were difficult. Father Machebeuf's journal tells of a visit to a frontier family in the Ohio territory in January of 1840. Seated before the cabin's fireplace, the priest began a letter to his family in France. He had written only a few words when his pen faltered. He discovered that the ink had frozen.

The next morning, as he departed to visit a nearby settlement, he was dressed in a cashmere wool-lined cloak, knit woolen jacket, long woolen underwear and stockings, and fur overshoes. Nevertheless, he had to dismount and run along beside his horse in order to keep warm.